

Conductor scores a century in ESO's thirtieth year
Robin Gregory reviews the celebrations

The Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra's 30th season was celebrated in style on Sunday 18 April with their annual choral concert which involved the 120-strong Eastbourne College Choral Society, a mix of pupils and College friends from the town and elsewhere.

Eastbourne's Mayor paid a warm tribute to conductor Graham Jones; this ESO concert was the one hundredth which he had conducted. The Mayor also praised the way in which Graham has strengthened the link between Eastbourne College and the town, a link which goes back to late Victorian times. And by the end of the performance of the boisterous *Festive Overture* by Shostakovich the audience, which packed St Saviour's Church, was in no doubt that the orchestra was in cracking form.

The main item in the first half was Fauré's popular *Requiem*. The *Introit* revealed a choir with fine, French-style forward voice-projection, enhanced by a wide age-range among the singers. Baritone Stephen Charlesworth replaced Martin Elliott (trapped wingless in Toronto). His mellifluous sound and musical insight were much admired. The soprano soloist in *Pie Jesu* was sixth-form pupil Sarah Blackmore, who sang with accuracy, choirboy-like purity of tone and commendable absence of vibrato. Throughout, choir and orchestra responded superbly to all the conductor's demands. Specially noticed were the viola, cello and double-bass sections which Fauré used without first violins for much of the early movements. In the rare climaxes the brass remained thoroughly musical; and there was some delicate woodwind throughout.

More Fauré after the interval: *Cantique de Jean Racine*, an early student work, later orchestrated. It sounds rather like a trial-run: a sort of mini-*Requiem* in French. Well sung; well played; and a perfect warm-up for the *Five Mystical Songs* by England's greatest symphonist, Vaughan Williams. These are settings of words by George Herbert, written early in the 17th century. The informative programme did not print Herbert's words, and, despite flawless articulation by Stephen Charlesworth, the unaccustomed form of verse for some was often lost beneath the brilliance of V-W's orchestral sound. That said, we had a stunning performance of this complex music, seldom played because of its difficulty. The title suggests tranquil meditation; but the 'life-affirming' music (David Force's well-chosen words in his valuable programme notes) has all the composer's power to inspire. This was a fine way to end this celebration of some of Eastbourne's most-valued musical talents.

Robin Gregory